

THE WINGED DEATH
VISCOUNT DE SOISSONS

THE WIDE WORLD MAGAZINE
(1904) 13: 435-438.



TOLD BY F. GONIN, OF BRETANIERES, FRANCE, AND SET DOWN IN ENGLISH BY THE
VISCOUNT DE SOISSONS.

"For many months vague stories had been circulating to the effect that the road from Besançon to Dole was haunted by a great bird-like creature, terrible to look upon and fierce beyond belief. Men called it the 'Winged Death.'" In this narrative the Viscount de Soissons relates a simple peasant's story of how he met this awful monster, and the weird experience that followed.



AD anybody told me, not long since, that I would be nearly done to death by a creature of the air I would have called him mad. Nevertheless, it has been fully proved to me that strange things may happen to a poor carter, without his leaving his village in the Jura and going to distant countries.

To set it down as briefly as possible, this is how it happened.

For many months vague stories had been circulating to the effect that the road from Besançon to Dole, in the Department of Doubs, France, was haunted by a great bird-like creature, terrible to look upon and fierce beyond belief. Men called



FRANÇOIS GONIN, THE FRENCH PEASANT WHO FOUGHT
THE "WINGED DEATH."
From a Photo.

it the "Winged Death," and made one another's hair rise by their tales concerning it. Nightly it was discussed in the *cabarets*, so that men went to their homes fearfully, not liking to be abroad when darkness fell.

One man, a carter like myself, told me that he had been attacked by the awful thing, which had rushed on him with open beak, shrieking horribly.

"Pierre Jacquelin," I said, "you are mad, raving mad! How big was this bird that attacked you?"

"Seven feet from wing to wing!"

"Nonsense! What did it look like?"

"Like a great buzzard, brown all over."

I began to laugh.

"Jacquelin, my boy," said

I, "tell that yarn to the old women. Your tale is improbable. For one thing, the buzzard is a dastard bird and easily beaten, not only by the raven, but also by the carrion crow; a buzzard is as likely to attack a man as the moon. For another thing, the biggest buzzard ever seen in these parts was three feet from wing to wing, not seven."

Jacquelin was not convinced. He did not actually state that the thing *was* a buzzard, he said; it might be an evil spirit in the shape of one.

ATTACKED BY A BUZZARD,

As he was driving near Dôle, in the French department of the Jura, a man named Gonin was suddenly attacked by an enormous buzzard, who tried to tear his head with beak and claws.

For ten minutes the strange combat continued, until at length the bird, which measured 5ft. 2in. across, says the "Petit Journal," was stunned by a blow from the man's whip and captured.

A CUTTING FROM THE "DAILY MAIL," REFERRING TO THE ATTACK ON GONIN BY THE ENORMOUS BUZZARD.

I was now reassured as to the strange tales of the winged monster which was supposed to haunt the road. Previously they had worried me somewhat, for they were vague and awe-inspiring, but if the "monster" was only a buzzard there was nothing to be afraid of. Knowing the cowardly nature of the bird I could not believe for a moment Jacquelin's extraordinary story, and his suggestion that the thing was an evil spirit I put down to his simple mind.

I went on my way light heartedly. It is a long and slow journey with an ox-cart from Besançon to Dôle, but I got along pretty well, and was within ten miles of the latter place, which I intended to reach the same night, when the dusk came on. I hurried up my slow-footed oxen, for I wanted to get into the town early.

Suddenly from the left, over the river, I heard a shrill, melancholy, whistle-like cry that sounded distinctly in the evening stillness. As I listened it sounded again, loud and piercing. My blood seemed to run cold; it was the cry that Jacquelin had imitated in the *cabaret* as being made by the creature that attacked him.

"François," I said to

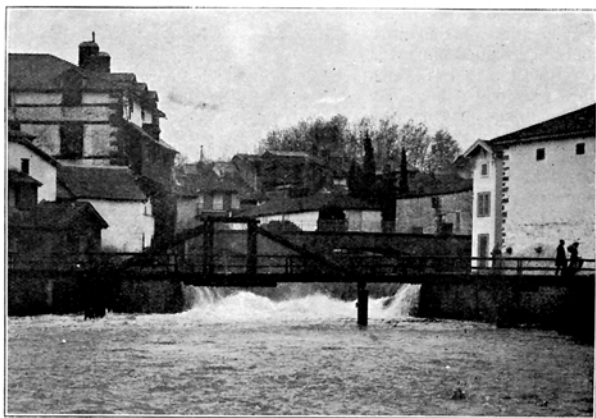
myself, "don't stand there like a gaping dolt. Do *you* believe that evil spirits go about in the shape of birds? No, of course you don't."

So I went on, though, in spite of all my attempts to keep my spirits up, I found myself glancing anxiously to right and left of the road during the next two miles. I heard the whistling twice in that time, but as nothing happened my terror wore off and I pressed on with a light heart. After another mile had been passed the rain began to fall heavily, so, seeing a convenient shelter under some thick trees, I drew up my beasts, sat on the cart, and began to smoke my pipe.

Dark clouds were now chasing each other over the heavens, and it grew very dark. The rain came down faster and faster until it was pouring in torrents.

Suddenly I heard that melancholy hooting again, now ringing clearer than ever in my ears, and the terror I had previously felt began to take hold of me again. I don't think I am a coward, but on a dark night, alone on a deserted road, to hear a sound that is associated with terrible stories of unknown terrors is surely enough to make the bravest man shudder. Remembering I had my *aves* and *paters* to say for the penance imposed on me by Father John, our priest, I took out my beads and began to run them through my fingers, but I could not concentrate my attention on them, and found myself straining my ears to hear that strange hooting again.

The storm had now increased in fury; pale flashes of lightning lit up the ink-black sky, and the dull rumbling of distant thunder was to be



THE TOWN OF DÔLE, TO WHICH PLACE GONIN WAS JOURNEYING WHEN HE WAS ATTACKED.
From a Photo.

heard. Presently, above the noise of the wind and rain, the sound I listened for rang out again—this time quite close to me. The lightning flashed repeatedly, and by the glare of one of these flashes I saw not far off a great bird darting through the air towards me.

A scream of terror burst from my lips, for I recognised the "huge brown bird" of Jacquelin's story. Then I took up my whip, and, holding it with the butt extended ready to strike, I waited. I heard the whirr of great wings circling round me without being able to see anything, for the play of the lightning had ceased for a moment. May none who read my story ever be in such a position as I was then—



"I HIT AT IT AS HARD AS I COULD."

face to face with some awful creature which I could hear and yet not see. Then I felt a rush of air, and as the lightning burst forth again I saw the buzzard—for a buzzard it was—fly at me. I waited until it swooped nearer, and then hit at it as hard as I could. The blow reached its mark, as I knew by the soft thud.

Another shriek, this time of rage, rent the air, and then the great bird disappeared into the blackness again. In the brief glimpse I had caught of it I could see that, although of great size, it was not seven feet across, as Jacquelin had said. I waited expectantly for some time, but the buzzard did not reappear, and when the storm passed over and the stars peeped out I recommenced my tramp to Dole, thinking myself well out of a tight corner. Evidently there had been some truth in my friend's story after all, although he had exaggerated the size of his assailant.

Before I had gone another mile I heard the whistling again. As quickly as possible I made for my whip, but before I could reach it I felt a pain in my shoulder as if red-hot irons had pierced it, while great wings flapped wildly in my face. Desperately I struggled to reach the whip, but the pain and the continual beating confused me. At last I hit out twice with my fist, reaching my enemy each time, and the claws relaxed their hold.

I got hold of the whip just in time to evade another attack, more furious than the last. My blood was now up and all the fighting instincts which we people of the Jura have in us were roused.

Five times the great bird swooped at me, but I did not hit out, for it was just beyond my reach, and I knew that it was only waiting for me to make a false stroke in order to get another grip of me. Then it gave up these tactics and came for me boldly, unexpectedly, so that at first I was taken by surprise,

but managed to leap aside and strike hard, again and again. The horrible creature's object was accomplished, however; it had hold of me, but only by my blouse, and not by the flesh. Bending down, therefore, I slipped out of the garment, but I could not free my left arm from the button at the wrist.

The great buzzard pulled and shook at the cloth savagely, nearly wrenching my shoulder from its socket, while I dealt repeated blows at it with my whip. Some of them told and others lost themselves in the folds of the blouse.

At last I was so shaken by the bird's tugging that I put my whip in my teeth and took out a clasp-knife. I opened it against the sleeve of my shirt—cutting myself twice in the operation—then severed the arm of the blouse from the body, thus liberating myself from the garment. Then I took the knife in my left hand and the whip in the other, preparatory to facing this winged fury again.

Once more it flew at me, and I defended myself as best I could, dealing heavy blows all round me with the whip. Then an idea came to me. Not far off lay the blouse, where the bird had dropped it. I tried to reach it, but this terrible bird seemed to understand my object and pressed me towards the waggon, where my oxen stood motionless, apparently paralyzed with terror. Overcome by the creature's onslaught, I was driven back against the vehicle, when by chance I felt a blanket behind me. That would be even better for my purpose than the blouse.

Seizing it, I waited for my chance; then, springing forward, in spite of the hail of blows from claws, beak, and wings, I threw the blanket over the bird's head and struck hard with the whip. The blow apparently stunned the creature, for it sank to the ground, still struggling feebly under the enveloping blanket. Picking my knife up from where I had dropped it in the road, I was about to kill my assailant when the idea came into my head that as this was an altogether extraordinary bird, both in size and

characteristics, I might be able to sell it to some menagerie.

Muffling the half-stunned creature still more securely in the blanket, I tied its formidable talons together with a piece of rope from the waggon and then lashed the bird to the back of the vehicle. This done, I removed the blanket, for my enemy had no more wish to struggle; my blows had effectually disabled it, and all its frenzied fury was gone.



"I THREW THE BLANKET OVER THE BIRD'S HEAD AND STRUCK HARD."

I reached Dole safely and stopped outside my usual *cabaret*, where I told the story of the capture to my friends there. I showed them the torn blouse and the marks of the talons on my face and shoulder, yet they would not believe me. Then I took them down to my cart, held up the captive bird, and laughed in their faces. We found that the creature measured five feet two inches across from tip to tip of its extended wings—truly enormous for a buzzard.

Such is the tale of my fight with the "Winged Death," of which I had heard so much talk in the *cabarets*. After all, you see, it had nothing to do with evil spirits, but was only an overgrown and unnaturally ferocious buzzard. What inspired the creature to attack human beings so savagely I do not know; that point I must leave to the men who study such things.